

HJ News Article: "We exist to help make communities better:' New initiatives for community engagement and open-access launched at USU"



USU Social Work faculty Jess Lucero (left) and Jayme Walters (right) stand with this year's Community Advocate of the year Trhas Tafere

LOGAN — USU's [Transforming Communities Institute](#) recently hosted a special launch event to reflect on their achievements to date, honor community advocates, and share their plans for the year ahead.

Under the leadership of several social work faculty including TCI Director Jayme Walters, the institute works with a variety of stakeholders to identify and respond to community needs across the state of Utah.

[Social Work](#) Department Head Jess Lucero started the Sept. 15 event by addressing the impetus for TCI. Lucero noticed that her students "were really excited about the action part of social work" and wanted opportunities to directly serve communities while completing their coursework. This pushed Lucero and other faculty to look for ways to "embed community engagement within our programs."

Walters also stressed the importance of "serv[ing] campuses and communities across the state." For her part, this led to conducting an assessment with her classes. "My students and I ... designed a mixed-methods study to essentially look at the social challenges and resources across Utah communities and understand the ways in which TCI could integrate more fully into those communities."

This 2021 assessment prioritized four areas: housing and homelessness; substance use, treatment and recovery; mental and physical healthcare access; and family and partner relationships. TCI will also delve into the intersection of these priority areas and issues related to racism, community vitality, sexual health and education, and LGBTQIA+ wellbeing.

The Sept. 15 event saw TCI leadership address their strategic plan and vision aimed at promoting community-based research, offering certificates to complement social work practice, providing professional development and training for existing practitioners and community leaders, creating affordable consulting services, and generating community-building initiatives.

TCI's launch was also a celebration of local advocates credited with improving the quality of life for others through their dedicated work within the community.

Trhas Tafere, a vulnerable populations coordinator at the Bear River Health Department, was named Community Advocate of the Year. Tafere, who said she was "happy to be the face of community engagement," is credited with pushing local services to address health disparities at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among immigrant populations.

Going forward, the institute plans to focus on making research more accessible for non-academic agencies, helping students understand what they're being trained to do in the real world, providing affordable or free training to communities needing access to subject expertise, being intentional about building community relationships, and shifting away from the idea that the university is the sole authority when it comes to devising solutions.

"The university isn't the answer. The university holds some resources and can be ... a positive addition to the general problem-solving that's happening," Lucero said. "But really, the answers exist in the community."

Housed within the [College of Humanities and Social Sciences](#), the [Transforming Communities Institute](#) aims to see all Utahns live in thriving, vibrant communities. TCI has an active presence on [social media](#) and routinely offers training and activities for all ages in the service of making additional connections and providing resources across the state. The institute seeks collaboration with diverse community partners to educate future social work professionals, community leaders, and members to intentionally and effectively improve community outcomes.

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